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# An update on Vanuatu's runway

by Matthew Dornan and Jonathan Pryke
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The statistics are in and there has indeed been a drop in visitor arrivals to Vanuatu. In February 2016, visitor arrivals by airplane were 21% lower than in February 2015 (dropping from 5,389 to 4,274) – an unwelcome decline for an economy still recovering from Cyclone Pam.

Since we wrote about the Vanuatu Government's failure to maintain its runway, Air New Zealand has postponed its return to Vanuatu, arguing that the remedial works on the runway are only temporary and that it needs greater long-term certainty before re-commencing flights.

There continues to be a widespread perception in Vanuatu that the flight cancellations have been driven by commercial incentives, and that the problems with the runway are being used as an excuse by the airlines to limit their flights. This week there has been a development that supports this argument. Air New Zealand several days ago sought permission to land a charter flight in Port Vila for returning ni-Vanuatu RSE workers – a request made despite Air New Zealand having announced it would not re-commence regular flights due to concerns about the condition of the runway. The Minister for Public Utilities and Infrastructure directed the Civil Aviation Authority Vanuatu (CAAV) to refuse the Air New Zealand request. He said in a statement: "To apply for a charter using an Airbus A320 indicates they are satisfied with the state of the runway – so the question must be asked, why are they willing to operate a profitable charter flight, yet not commit to resuming commercial services?"

The Air New Zealand website, notwithstanding its attempt to charter a flight to Vanuatu, continues to state that: "Air New Zealand is suspending services between Auckland and Vanuatu in light of on-going concerns about the condition of the runway at Port Vila International Airport." Qantas has still not confirmed whether or when it will reinstate it's codeshare with Air Vanuatu, but a (possible) silver lining is that Virgin has begun taking bookings for flights from May 23 after nearly four months of suspension.

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